

## The Hungarian Non-governmental Development Organization(NGDO) sector – Initial observations

by Anna Selmeczi<sup>1</sup>

According to a recent Union-wide survey on Europeans' attitude toward development aid, the Hungarian public is the least supportive of helping poor people in developing countries (Special Eurobarometer 375, 9). Among all member states, the proportion of those who think it is "important" or "very important" to help poor people in developing countries is the lowest in Hungary, while significant minorities think that due to the present economic crisis, the EU should freeze development aid (43%) or should not increase its amount despite an earlier pledge to do so (23%) (Special Eurobarometer 375, 25). While the percentage of those in favor of providing development aid to worse off parts of the world is still relatively high (75%) (Special Eurobarometer 375, 9), the survey results seems to resonate with activists' and experts' view that people in Hungary focus mostly on domestic issues and international aid is not of significant public concern (see e.g. Vári 2007a).<sup>2</sup> According to the aid coordinator of a prominent development and humanitarian aid organization, the African-Hungarian Union (AHU), the Hungarian public lacks interest in international issues generally and the plight of poor people in "distant" continents particularly.<sup>3</sup> Explaining this lack of interest with historical reasons, major church-affiliated charity organization Baptist Aid's coordinator noted that unlike in Hungary, in West-European countries, where development aid often features in the public discourse, international development has a century long history and, correspondingly contributing to a higher public engagement, the NGDO sector in these countries are much more established than in our region.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, historical and political circumstances greatly determined the extent to which the Hungarian public has been exposed to the problems of developing countries and international development throughout the state socialist period, and have also contributed to shaping a predominantly domestically focused civil sector after democratization. Although two decades after the transition civil society organizations are now perceiving a need to expand their activities beyond both the national level and the aims of constructing civil society with at the same time encouraging civil engagement after an era of oppressive paternalism (Vita Europa n. d.),<sup>5</sup> there are many reasons why this is not (yet) paralleled by the general public's opening toward global concerns such as development aid.

To begin, as Sára Vári (2007a) notes, the aim to raise public awareness about international development issues was non-existent in the socialist period, even though Hungary, like other countries of the Soviet bloc, was an active donor of several developing countries.<sup>6</sup> The consequent negative public attitude to development

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2 According to 23% of the respondents, providing aid to developing countries is "not important". Although support in 2009 was much higher (86%, showing a 13% point evolution since 2004 and placing Hungary into the "supportive" group alongside e.g. the Netherlands and the UK, Special Eurobarometer 318, p20), the previous two surveys (2007 and 2009) of the subject seem to be largely in line with the findings of the most recent one, and thus reaffirm the points above.

3 VK, AHU coordinator, interview, August 15, 2012.

4 BA, Baptist Aid coordinator, personal communication, August 13, 2012.

5 Vita Europa citations refer to [a set of interviews and articles](#) that contributors of Vita Europa, a website dedicated to the third sector in Europe, compiled about the Hungarian civil society scene in general and the NGDO sector in particular.)

6 According to Szent-Iványi (2009, 183), in the 1970s and 1980s Hungary's ODA spending exceeded the 0.7% of the national income on several occasions (see also Paragi, Szent-Iványi, Vári 2007). (Of course, as Szent-Iványi notes, this calculation is not the most accurate as the forms of aid provided in this period are not completely compatible with the current categorization.) The most prominent forms of Hungary's ODA were technical aid in the form of expert exchange programs and the scholarship programs supporting the Hungarian higher education of students from developing countries (Suha 2011). The latter are still remembered in the benefiting countries and many of the former students work in their public sectors (ISZ, coordinator at AHU, interview, August 15, 2012; see also Vári 2007b and Suha 2011).

aid – again, similarly to other countries of the region – persists in the current, post-EU accession period of donorship (Vári 2007a), as the above cited Eurobarometer surveys also demonstrate. In addition, despite Hungary's relatively short period as an aid-recipient country, society still manifests the sentiment of aid-dependency (Vári 2007a). On the one hand, in the public view the country's EU-accession primarily meant access to new financial resources and the consequent opportunity to approach old member states' living standard. On the other hand, and of course not independently of the transitory recipient status, for most people, Hungary has not yet reached the level of economic development where it can, or should, support other countries.<sup>7</sup> Yet, citing the results of a 2004 survey, Vári (2007a) argues that this aspect of the sentiment of aid dependency does not seem to affect the "inward" solidarity of the public as domestically "nearly four fifths of the population aged fourteen and over were involved in making at least one kind of donation out of the following: financial donations, donations in kind, unpaid voluntary activities and blood donations in 2004" (Czike and Kuti 2005). More recent surveys, however, do not support this argument. According to a 2011 Gallup survey of civic engagement in 130 countries, with an index score of 22%, Hungary is positioned within the least engaged fifth of the states surveyed.<sup>8</sup> As opposed to the quoted study from 2004, the 2011 results show that only 20 percent of the population donated money, 8 percent worked as a volunteer and 37% "helped a stranger" (Gallup 2011).<sup>9</sup>

That Hungary's international aid activities did not require societal awareness, support or engagement under socialism is hardly surprising.<sup>10</sup> But why do many effects of this period persist in Hungary's new era of donorship? In terms of public opinion, the above mentioned sentiment that Hungary is itself in need of aid, coupled with politicians' awareness that most regions of the country still significantly lag behind old member-states' level of development does not make the allocation of large funds for international development easily justifiable (Szent-Iványi 2009; see also Paragi, Szent-Iványi, Vári 2007). Another possible explanation can be derived from trends of immigration and Hungary's being a transit rather than a target country, due to which people here are less exposed to the concerns of developing countries and their expatriates (Vári 2007a). Likewise, on the level of popular perception (and often in the perception of decision-makers too), Hungary's geopolitical position spares it from facing the security risks of the developing world's weak or failed states (Szent-Iványi 2009). Interrelated to all these characteristics is the absence of development issues from curricula on all levels of education (Vári 2007a). Despite a rather successful Official Development Aid (ODA) module at the Corvinus University of Budapest, funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the European Commission and terminated with the outside resources drying out,<sup>11</sup> at present, there is no ODA program in Hungarian higher education.

Beyond resulting in the relative lack of public support, together with other historical circumstances, the inheritance of socialist donorship continues to shape the patterns of Hungarian ODA activities on the level of strategy-making too. On the one hand, without a colonist past, Hungary does not have the ties to developing countries that many of the old member states do and, correspondingly, both its political and economic relations with these countries are contingent and minimal (Szent-Iványi 2009). Furthermore, despite the fact that the previous technical assistance and scholarship programs were successful in their own time and the people involved on both sides still represent a significant human capital, the sea change in world politics and Hungary's transformed foreign policy priorities render this resource less competitive or useful in the post-Cold War ODA scene (Suha 2011).

In light of the above, it is hardly of surprise that the ODA obligations applying to all EU member states have continued to pose major challenges to the Hungarian foreign affairs administration since coming into effect in 2003. After the short post-democratization period of ad hoc decisions and minimal ODA activities practiced

7 It is informative to add here that, as Balázs Szent-Iványi (2009) notes, the re-launching of Polish international aid activities was an important instrument of the government in demonstrating that the country had completed its transition to market economy. It is also illustrative, then, that the Polish MFA's campaign of the period addressed a public sentiment similar to the Hungarian by emphasizing that Poland does indeed belong to the developed part of the world: "Poland is paradise for 1.2 billion people in the world" (Vári 2007a, see also Belgian Development Cooperation 2005, 8).

8 With the index score of 50, the USA and Ireland are featured as the most civically engaged. Except Slovenia (41), Poland (32), and the Czech Republic (28), all surveyed new member states' scores are in the lower twenties.

9 According to the 2004 study, 65.2% of respondents donated money and 39.6% did voluntary work (Czike and Kuti 2005, 5). However, whereas the earlier study included the 1% tax donations in the first category, in case of the Gallup (2011) survey this is unlikely.

10 Under socialist rule, civil society participation in development and humanitarian aid activities was limited to a few church-related charities and issue-specific funds administered by leagues or committees of the Communist Party (Paragi, Szent-Iványi and Vári 2007).

11 BA, coordinator at Baptist Aid, personal communication, August 13, 2012.

mostly through multilateral institutions (1990-1996) (Paragi, Szent-Iványi, Vári 2007), and the similarly brief period of aid reciprocity (e.g. through the PHARE program), the shift in the country's role from recipient to donor still marked the beginning of a difficult learning process.<sup>12</sup> Especially given that questions of development aid and candidate states' preparedness in this field did not feature prominently on the agenda of the accession negotiations. In fact, as Beáta Paragi notes, following the accession, this lack of attention dawned on both Brussels and the new member states as a "mutual surprise" (Paragi, Szent-Iványi, Vári 2007, 157). In compensation, the European Commission provided funds for old member states' knowledge transfer and capacity building programs for new member states, involving governmental and civil society organizations as well.

Indeed, it is largely through such capacity building programs – crucial among which was the Canadian International Development Agency's (CIDA) Official Development Assistance to Central Europe (ODACE) – that in the early 2000s there emerged a small but relatively stable sector of non-governmental organizations engaged in the area of international development and humanitarian aid (Paragi, Szent-Iványi, Vári 2007). Giving momentum to a new paradigm of civil society organization (CSO) involvement, the EU-accession and the generous funding programs of this period promised to remove ODA activities from the sole purview of the foreign affairs administration. As an important step in fostering this diversification of actors and roles, coalescing around efforts at raising public awareness about issues of global development and making an impact on official development strategy and policy making, in 2002 the umbrella organization Hungarian Association for Development and Humanitarian Aid (HAND) of NGOs was formed. Whilst there were 12 full and 5 observer members that founded the organization (HAND 2012a), currently there are 16 organizations listed as full members, while BOCS Foundation (Brain Organization for Civilization of Sustainability) participates as an observer member.<sup>13</sup>

Due perhaps to the Hungarian NGDO sector's prehistory and its relatively short lifespan, [HAND's membership](#) is rather heterogeneous. First, beyond environmental and volunteer sending organizations, scholarly or educational associations fostering intercultural understanding, and NGOs promoting the culture of civil society activism, there are "only" 5-6 organizations whose primary focus is international development and humanitarian aid. To be sure, the overlap between members' profiles enables their cooperation (see also Trialog 2005). Second, and applying not just to HAND member organizations but to the whole of the NGDO sector, the major development and humanitarian aid organizations with an actual capacity to realize on-the-ground projects are almost exclusively church affiliated – such as the [Caritas Hungarica](#), the [Hungarian Baptist Aid](#), the [Hungarian Maltese Charity Service](#) or the [Hungarian Interchurch Aid](#).<sup>14</sup> Most probably, both attributes are due to the lack of sufficient funding available for NGDOs.<sup>15</sup>

Despite these difficulties, over the past decade, HAND has grown into the single most important civil society actor of the Hungarian development scene. Beyond representing most of the major development and humanitarian organizations of the country, HAND – itself or through its member organizations – is active in regional (e.g. the [Visegrad Four](#)) and European NGDO platforms such as CONCORD Europe too. Accordingly, it is their AidWatch

12 Even if HUN-IDA Kht., the public benefit company winning both the 2004 and the 2006 tenders of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for managing the application process for ODA funds and the related diplomatic delegations, is – in terms of its funders – the successor of Tesco International Cooperation and Consultancy Ltd. that in the 1990s privatized Tesco Foreign Trade Corporation, which, in turn, was founded in 1962 and was responsible for scientific diplomacy and technology transfer to developing countries before the regime change. Not unrelated to this legacy, the new generation of Hungarian NGDOs view HUN-IDA's role with suspicion (Sára Vári, researcher, personal communication July 10, 2012; see Miklósi 2007, Suha 2011).

13 According to a country report on Hungary's NGDOs written by Trialog (2005), an Austria-based CSO project fostering international development cooperation, by July 2005, 23 organizations joined the platform. (Trialog's primary information source was Réka Balogh, HAND's longtime coordinator.)

14 Sára Vári, ODA expert, personal communication, July 10, 2012 and BA, coordinator at Hungarian Baptist Aid, personal communication, August 13, 2012. Caritas Hungarica and the Hungarian Maltese Charity Service are members of HAND.

15 According to a member of HAND's presidency, global education and awareness raising programs are the main activities of Hungarian NGDOs because these are the kind of projects for which there is available funding (HAND, notes taken at a platform presidency meeting, August 28, 2012). Lack of sufficient funds is mentioned as an obvious obstacle to expand their activities by all NGDO activists or experts whom I have talked to so far. The main reason seems to be that Hungarian civil sector is generally dependent on state funding, which has been significantly shrinking over the past few years, due to e.g. the fivefold decrease in the budget of the National Civil Fund (Nemzeti Civil Alap, NCA), which has been the major source of CSO funding since its 2004 establishment. Further difficulties are predicted to result from the recent introduction of the flat tax rate, since it will affect the amount of individuals' 1% tax pledges (Freedom House 2012, 246). Relatedly, regarding their access to EU funds, activists frequently voice their disappointment, as only a few Hungary-based organizations have the resources to pre-finance projects and/or have established and maintain up-to-date international networks generally required for applying for EU instruments (ISZ, coordinator at AHU, interview, August 15, 2012; see Vita n.d.).

Working Group that prepares Hungary's country pages in CONCORD's yearly AidWatch reports. Whereas HAND also participates in the fora dedicated to the dialogue between governmental agencies (primarily the MFA) and CSOs,<sup>16</sup> and the platform's opinion (among that of other significant NGOs) has been taken into consideration in several cases, according to the Hungarian Baptist Aid's coordinator, their effect on policy-making is more ad hoc in its character.<sup>17</sup> As the discussion at HAND's presidential meeting underscore, on the level of Hungary's ODA strategy, their impact appears to be rather limited. In the words of a participant, "nothing we have ever suggested was carried into effect – neither in terms of law, nor strategy making or regarding the procedures of ODA tenders".<sup>18</sup> As in relation to the political leverage of the MFA's ODA Department (Nemzetközi Fejlesztési Főosztály, NEFE-FO) another member stated: "this sector is still struggling for its survival, just like twenty years ago". That the Hungarian government has so far failed to adopt a national ODA strategy can be regarded as both the consequence and the clearest illustration of such a struggle.

In the NGO sector's view, one of the most problematic consequences of the lack of a national strategy is the large number and almost nonstrategic composition of ODA partner countries (see e.g. Morenth and Tarrósy 2011 and Concord 2012, 50).<sup>19</sup> As organizations have been arguing during the past several years, Hungary has unrealized potentials for reinvigorating or establishing development partnerships in sub-Saharan Africa. With the African continent being a priority of the European Union's (EU) ODA policies, making use of these potentials is indeed desirable (Morenth and Tarrósy 2011). Nevertheless, Africa has remained marginal in Hungary's ODA activities so far. According to a coordinator of the African-Hungarian Union (AHU), who is also a member of HAND's Africa Working Group, although experts and activists with an African focus have been regularly consulted by the ODA department in the past, lacking political commitment of the highest level and (thus) the appropriate financial resources, their recommendations have not been translated into strategic changes as yet.<sup>20</sup> Giving reason for some hope in this regard, Hungary's current [foreign policy strategy](#) articulates a governmental intention of "global opening", including an increased attention to sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>21</sup> However, if the implied plans of extending development aid to this region are to garner popular support, launching a nationwide awareness raising campaign might ultimately be necessary. According to the previously cited EU-wide survey, falling much below the European average response of 70%, only 51% of the Hungarian population believes sub-Saharan Africa to be the area that is mostly in need of development aid (Special Eurobarometer 375, 13–16). Despite NGO's determination to change the public's perception about Africa,<sup>22</sup> then, AHU coordinator VK's assessment that, for the majority of Hungarians, African people seem as distant as "Martians" might not even be that exaggerated.<sup>23</sup>

16 Primary among these is the yearly meeting of the NEFE TTT (ODA Public Consultancy Syndicate) established in 2003 to promote the societal acceptance of foreign development and humanitarian aid. It also serves as the platform for CSO input on Hungary's ODA strategy to-be. Recently, in response to the MFA's discussion paper on the subject, members of HAND articulated their strategic recommendations. (Available in Hungarian [here](#).)

17 Personal communication, August 13, 2012.

18 HAND, notes taken at a platform presidency meeting, August 28, 2012. See also Hunyadi and Scheiring (2006, 26–27).

19 Since 2008, the partner countries for Hungary's ODA have been the following: "Priority countries: Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Vietnam, Palestinian Authority; Project based partner countries: Ukraine, Kosovo, Montenegro, FYROM [Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia], Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Yemen, Laos, Cambodia, Sub-Saharan Africa [sic], Afghanistan, Iraq" (MFA presentation at WB-EC-UNDP Workshop, June 13, 2012, 5).

20 In order to promote the articulation of Hungary's Africa strategy, academics, independent experts and NGOs with an African focus have prepared the "[Strategic recommendations](#) for Hungary's future development strategy in Africa" (Morenth and Tarrósy 2011). According to HAND (2012b), the MFA's subsequently published strategic document – "[Hungarian foreign policy after the EU presidency](#)" – endorsed a number of the NGOs recommendations.

21 Based on a personal discussion with an MFA official, a participant of HAND's presidential meeting talked about the Ministry's actual steps toward such opening, namely, a delegation visiting several countries in Africa, including Kenya and Ethiopia (notes taken on August 28, 2012). See also Márton Leiszen's analysis of the strategy.

22 VK and ISZ, coordinators at AHU, interview August 15, 2012. See also the activities of the [Hungarian Africa Platform](#), an umbrella organization of Africa-focused NGOs.

23 VK, coordinator at AHU, interview August 15, 2012.



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